Koshin Paley Ellison and Robert Chodo Campbell
Week 3, Caring for the World: The Eight Awarenesses
Mindfulness and Concentration
June 17, 2013
www.tricycle.com/retreats

Chodo: So, welcome to week three. Again, thank you all of you who took part in last week's session and dialogues. It was a really great week once again. Koshin?

Koshin: Yeah, we were exploring two of the eight awarenesses: serenity and meticulous effort. It's an ongoing exploration. So, it was a wonderful conversation this week to really get into how these work in our ordinary life. And today, we want to focus on the next two awarenesses, building on those to see how we can engage our lives, how we can care for ourselves in the world in terms of mindfulness and concentration.

Chodo: And ask, what does mindfulness look like in the world?

Koshin: Right, in an ordinary way.

Chodo: Right. The Sanskrit *samyak-smirti* is variously translated as "correct remembrance." I love that: "correct remembrance," "balanced recollectedness," and "right mindfulness," the last of which is actually what we're talking about here, part of the Eightfold Path, the Eight Awarenesses. Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, "Smirti literally means "remembering," not forgetting where we are, what we are doing, and who we are with. So, with training, every time we breathe in and out, mindfulness will be there if we're there."

Koshin: *If* we're there.

Chodo: If we're there, mindfulness will be there with each in breath and each out breath, which in our practice is what we talk about the whole time, just counting the breath, breath awareness.

Koshin: And also the freedom that comes with just coming back to the breath, remembering that this is all we have.

Chodo: It reminds me of an encounter with a patient who was actually very seriously ill, who was not actually going to get out of the hospital, and was dying. I had been visiting with him for three or four weeks and one day, I asked him, "How are you doing this morning?" And he said, "I'm feeling much better. I think I've turned a corner." And I wondered how to be with that, how to be with this patient who feels that he's turned a corner, that he's getting better, that he's going to go home. What are the skillful means there? What is correct remembrance, actually? I think that comes into it to say, how do we remember that this person in front of us has or is envisioning a very different life, and how do we simply be there mindfully without actually colluding, without saying, "Yes, you're getting much better. I'm so glad to see you're going to be out of here soon," but just to pay attention, to be mindful of what's happening for him, for me—what's happening in this situation. How can I be there in an authentic way?

Koshin: Right. That story reminds me of the story of the blind men and the elephant—where each of the blind men are asked to describe this elephant. One was holding the leg and said, "Well, the elephant is like a tree trunk." And another one was holding the tail and was asked what an elephant is and he says, "It's like a broom." And the other one has the trunk and says, "It's like a giant snake." And so sometimes we can be very aware of where we are, but one of the things that we do with our students is to really help them develop a kind of 360 degree awareness too. So, being aware not only of what we have our hands on, but that there's also a bigger picture—that we can really widen out our awareness and mindfulness.

Chodo: Right, as with this patient. You have the doctors and the nurses, the family. They are all seeing a different part of that elephant. You know, they're all touching a different part of this person's life as it relates to their own experience with this person. So, when he says, "I'm feeling much better. I've turned a corner," with the thought of going home and maybe his wife who really wants that to happen is feeling that part of the elephant that is hopefulness, is a cure. And then, you have the doctor who's looking at the notes with the same elephant. I hate to say the elephant in the room.

Koshin: But it kind of is.

Chodo: Yeah, it is the elephant in the room, right?

Koshin: Mm-hmm.

Chodo: It's the same elephant. And the doctor touching another part knows this patient is going to die. And how do we take all of that in? How are we able to? I love that, where is it again, that balanced recollectiveness, to recollect what this person's journey has been and where it's going.

Koshin: And I think this quality of mindfulness really leads to the next awareness of concentration, of *samadhi* as we call it, which is often translated as a concentration. And it comes from being very focused—I think of it almost like bathing the mind in concentration, an awareness and wisdom that developed from this kind of concentration that we nurture in our meditation practice. I remember I was seeing someone talking to a student; they were talking about their meditation practice. And they felt very distracted, they felt like that they wanted to try other things in their meditation practice, like thinking about other things, or, "I've got a lot of big decisions to make and am I going to use my meditation practice? Maybe I'll mix that in there." But it really dilutes the bath of samadhi, of concentration, of just doing what we're doing, right? Like in the Zen stories of chopping wood and carrying water. It's just doing what you're doing. When you're meditating, just meditate. When you're thinking through something important, think

through that and don't scramble it all up. Allowing ourselves—as you beautifully talked about in the first week—about just being intimate with where you are.

Chodo: In whatever situation.

Koshin: Absolutely.

Chodo: Whatever the situation.

Koshin: And that's the way that we can really care.

Chodo: And we always say, or we try to express to our students in the first weeks of training: One can only be as intimate with another as one is with oneself. So, unless you're taking on these awarenesses wholeheartedly in your practice, in your meditation practice, in your life, in your work practice—taking on these awarenesses in a really intimate way—you're not really reaching the level of authenticity that you could do with the other or with oneself. But in our work, especially in our work where intimacy is such an integral part of what we do, of being able to connect to the patient, to the family member, to the doctor, to the bereaved, it's so important to have for us that place to return to, the cushion to sit.

Koshin: But even without the cushion to sit. So that when we're in the midst of it, we can sit with ourselves, when we're in those moments that are kind of disorienting and difficult. So, we sit. It is actually like the skillful means so that we can be wherever we are fully in that kind of concentration.

Chodo: I love the idea of taking the cushion with us wherever we are. We actually don't have to have the cushion, just metaphorically. We can return to the cushion if it's just in the hallway or in the waiting room, or across the street.

Koshin: Like with that patient who was really angry on the oncology floor, right? It's like the moments where we think that we're going to be experiencing something totally different. There was a woman who was very angry and was very upset and the staff

didn't want to deal with her. And they didn't know what to do so they asked us to go see her. And this woman was so angry and just like when you got in the room, she was throwing stuff because she was so pissed. After kind of dodging the tissue boxes and little plastic cups, I stayed there with her and was able to tap into that quality of where I could just stay with my breath and realize that her anger wasn't the whole thing. And so, to me, that concentration, that samadhi, we develop it for this. I wasn't in danger and neither was she. She realized after she tried to get rid of me that I was still there. She was like, "Well, what are you still doing here?" I said, "Well, I'm curious about why you're so upset and so angry." She was like, "You are? Sit down."

Chodo: And she was dying.

Koshin: Right.

Chodo: I think you said to her, when you told me the story, you said to her, "Well, I would be pissed too." Here's this young woman in her 40s or something like that who was dying of cancer, metastatic cancer, and she was pissed. Hey, I would be pissed too. She had two children, a husband, and Koshin was able to stay with her in that anger, to not run out of the room. We hear so often about difficult patients. "Call the chaplain or the social worker because we can't deal with this particular patient because they're being very difficult." It's awfully sad sometimes.

Koshin: And it's not like that was an easy moment for me either, but what was important was that I was able to, through the practice, remember to come back to my breath, and feel it in my hara. So, this is something of a great practice in the Zen school is to really experience your breath in your hara, which is the space about two inches below your belly button, to really locate your breath there. And so, in that moment, I was able to do that and remember. You were talking about bringing the cushion with you. The cushion for me is to come back and just feel my breath there and sometimes even just put my finger there just to remind myself. And so we can remind each other because we need good spiritual friends on this journey.

Chodo: Also, I think that we locate—you say to locate the breath just below the hara, but I think actually in those moments, we're locating everything. We're bringing everything to that place. So, we're breathing in—when we say that we're breathing in, we're actually bringing it down into the hara. It's all there, and we're making space for that with the breath.

Koshin: For the world.

Chodo: For the world, absolutely, because we are not separate. So, we're breathing in. We're doing this practice for the world. But, to be able to think that with this woman's anger, with this woman's sorrow, or even the joys of a newbie in the maternity room, to be able to bring all that in a day's work just to that point below the hara; when we breathe in and say, "This is it. This is the samadhi." It's all in there, right—her anger, the mother's joy, the beauty of it all, and the horror sometimes. It's all there.

Koshin: Right. For me, that's what the practice looks like when we were talking about last week about the maelstrom. That's what's holding onto the barrel and throwing yourself in is seeing the big picture. So, I experienced that when I am able to remind myself to come back to the breath. So, this is one of the practices we'd like to offer for this week in terms of concentration and mindfulness: how to practice with these qualities we want to explore. Even if you have a different lineage or practice to experience, coming back to your breath in your hara, this area in your body just two inches below your belly button, just locating it there so that you can remember where you are, and who you're with. So we'll be together in that and exploring it in our discussion this week so that we can engage and see how it is and to get curious about how it is and to fall down seven times and get up eight times. You're not going to do it perfectly. As Suzuki Roshi says, "We'll practice this, being perfect and complete just as we are. And we all need a little work."

Chodo: And to remember that when we're talking about holding all this stuff just below the hara when we're breathing it in, is to not *hold on*. It's not about holding on to it. It's

not about being attached to it. It's not about breathing in the story and breathing in the sadness and anger and just holding it there. It's a different kind of holding. It's about how we balance all that in our practice. And it's not about letting go. It's just about letting be. It's there.

Koshin: Beautiful.

Chodo: Beautiful.

Koshin: So, let's adventure together.

Chodo: Let's do that together and next week we'll check in on the last two awarenesses. Thank you.

Koshin: Thank you.